SMART STEPS

Mistaken Identity? Can Demographics Explain the Houston 10

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Houston Independent School District (ISD) has 10 notoriously troubled schools (see table). Those schools have been on the Texas Education Agency's (TEA's) list of schools requiring improvement for four consecutive years. A fifth year on the list for any of the 10 schools would trigger serious consequences for the district.[1]

But is this a case of mistaken identity? The 10 persistently failing campuses serve a persistently challenged student body. It's possible that they have been unfairly singled out due to factors outside of school or district control.

Texas Smart Schools (TSS) uses data from the state's accountability system to measure each school's contribution to student academic growth. But instead of focusing on levels of performance—as TEA did when assigning these schools the state's lowest accountability rating—TSS focuses on changes in performance from one year to the next. The individual progress of each student is adjusted for the influence of key demographics—such as poverty, special education status, language proficiency, prior performance, and grade level. Then the adjusted scores of all students in the school are combined to produce an Academic Progress Index.[2] Schools with a TSS Academic Progress Index of 93 had more academic progress than 93 percent of Texas schools. Starting with individual student results and accounting for factors that are beyond school district control yields a much

Table: 2018 TSS Academic Progress Index for 10 Houston ISD Campuses

	TSS Academic Progress Index
Kashmere High School	0
Wheatley High School	1
Worthing High School	0
Henry Middle School	3
Woodson School	2
Blackshear Elementary School	32
Dogan Elementary School	6
Highland Heights Elementary	17
Mading Elementary School	27
Wesley Elementary School	7

fairer measure of the effect school districts and campuses had on the academic progress of their students than other evaluation methods.

As the table illustrates, demographics cannot explain the poor performance of most of the Houston 10. The three high schools among the 10 all had academic progress scores below 2, meaning that even after demographic adjustments, they were still in the bottom 2 percent of

public schools in Texas. The Woodson School (which serves grades PK-8) and Henry Middle School were only slightly better.

On the other hand, a couple of the elementary schools among the Houston 10 appear to be getting a bum rap. Blackshear Elementary has an Academic Progress Score of 32% and Mading Elementary has an Academic Progress Score of 27%. Those scores aren't great, but they aren't horrible either. There are plenty of Houston ISD elementary schools with lower Academic Progress scores that haven't been labeled as failing by TEA.[3]

Takeaway

The TSS Academic Progress Index reflects only on the part of student performance that 1) is systematically related to the school; and 2) cannot be explained by differences in the student body. As such, it provides a perspective on school performance that is a helpful alternative to TEA's accountability ratings

The TSS measures of academic progress confirm that most of the Houston 10 truly are doing a woeful job. However, the threat of sanctions places a harsh and arguably unfair burden on Blackshear and Mading Elementaries. Our analysis shows that much of their low performance comes from factors outside the control of the campus or district.

Focusing attention where it belongs—on campuses where low marks cannot be attributed to factors outside of school and district control— would be a better use of resources and provide a little relief for Houston ISD. With two fewer schools to worry about, Houston ISD could focus more attention on getting the remaining eight campuses back on track.

About the Authors

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Notes:
1. See http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter097/ch097ee.html .
2. For more on the TSS methodology, see http://txsmartschools.org/highlights/.
3. To see which Houston ISD elementary schools have lower Academic Progress scores, visit http://www.txsmartschools.org/Apples2Apples/.

About TXSmartSchools.org

TXSmartSchools.org is an online resource which allows anyone to access Texas school and district-level data and "Smart Scores" free of charge. It uses comprehensive academic, financial, and demographic data to create the fairest, most apples-to-apples comparisons available. The goal is to improve education by identifying Smart Schools that are both effective and efficient and then highlighting their successful practices.

TXSmartSchools.org is built on the foundational work of the Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST) launched by Susan Combs during her tenure as Texas Comptroller. It is supported by Susan Combs through Texans for Positive Economic Policy and administered by Texas A&M University.

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